

**04** PREACHING THE  
HOLINESS OF GOD  
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YOUR WORSHIP  
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BEAUTY  
MICHAEL REEVES

# EXPOSITOR

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SPRING 2020

*No. 30*

## PREACHING *THE* HOLINESS *OF* GOD



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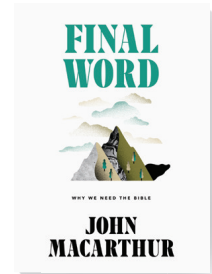
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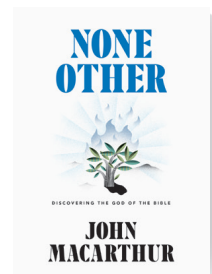
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# Encountering God's Holiness

DR. STEVEN J. LAWSON, PRESIDENT, ONEPASSION MINISTRIES



There are certain books that mark a person's life, that leave an indelible impression upon the reader. These pivotal books define who we are and shape how we think. Often, the right book brings the right message at the right time.

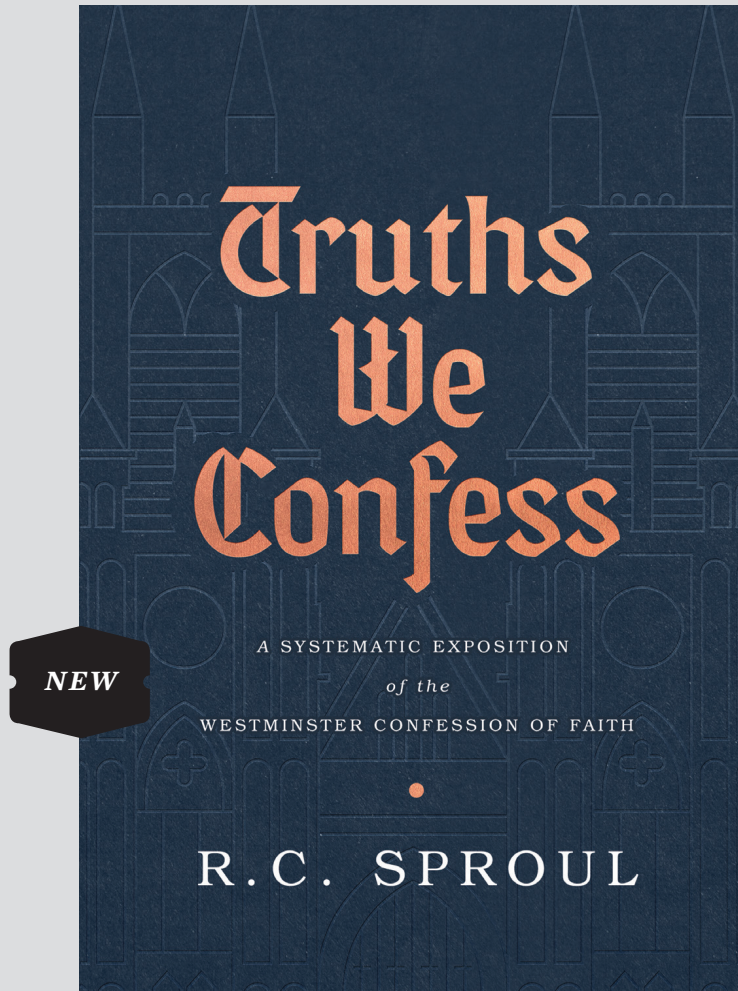
In my life, *The Holiness of God* by R. C. Sproul was one of those books. From the first page, this book grabbed me by the lapels and drew me up in my seat. This book pulled back the veil and allowed me to see God in a far greater way than I had ever seen Him before. The book left an indelible mark upon my Christian life, a permanent imprint that I carry with me to this day.

The absolute holiness of God is simply that monumental of a message. It is a life-altering truth that brings weighty consequences to the heart made ready to receive it. It is arguably the most important attribute of God anyone can behold. When we see the holiness of God, we see ourselves

for who we are: fallen, sinful creatures in His sight. And when we see His holiness, the cross of Jesus Christ shines brighter than ten thousand suns.

It is for this reason that I am eager for you to read this issue of *Expositor*. An emphasis on God's holiness must be recovered in the church today. Each article is devoted to this essential study. May the truth about our Father's divine perfection leave its soul-shaping effect upon your life. ♦

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven J. Lawson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.



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**STEVEN J. LAWSON** is founder and president of OnePassion Ministries. He is a Ligonier Ministries teaching fellow, director of the doctor of ministry program at The Master's Seminary, and host of the Institute for Expository Preaching. He is the author of numerous books.

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**JOHN MACARTHUR** is pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, CA, and president of The Master's College and Seminary. He has authored numerous books and is a regular contributor to *Expositor Magazine*.

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**JOEL R. BEEKE** is president of the Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, and Pastor of Heritage Netherlands Reformed Congregation in Grand Rapids, MI.

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**MICHAEL REEVES** is president and professor of Union School of Theology, Oxford, UK. He is a regular speaker at conferences around the world and has written extensively on the Trinity and church history.

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**MICHAEL A.G. HAYKIN** is professor of biblical spirituality and church history at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, where he is also the director of The Andrew Fuller Center for Baptist Studies.

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# Preaching *the* Holiness *of* God

STEVEN J. LAWSON

If the chief purpose of the Word of God is to glorify God, the greatest preachers are those who most highly exalt His greatness. Powerful expositors continually magnify the awesome majesty of God. Great preaching is that which greatly exalts the greatness of God.

This kind of transcendent preaching defined the expository ministry of the renowned Genevan Reformer John Calvin. Benjamin B. Warfield once explained the greatness of Calvin and his pulpit ministry: “Here we have the secret of Calvin’s greatness and the source of his strength. No man ever had a profounder view of God than he.” Other preachers in Calvin’s day may have had a more winsome personality or more dynamic delivery. But none had such a high view of God.

This same towering view of God describes the preaching of Jonathan Edwards. George Mardsen, his noted biographer, states: “Edwards always begins with God. . . . He was absolutely preoccupied with the centrality of God.” Michael J. McClymond, another Edwardian scholar, notes: “Edwards is unfailingly theocentric. . . . His pervasive focus is upon the reality, centrality, and supremacy of God. . . . Edwards consistently strives to exalt God.” Mark Noll describes it as “God-entranced” preaching.

## **Where Preaching Must Begin**

If the exaltation of God is to define our preaching, it must

begin with our continual focus upon the holiness of God. No other divine attribute is more important than this aspect of His character. In heaven, God is being fervently praised by the angelic host, who cry out, “Holy, Holy, Holy” (Isa 6:3). This same heavenly worship was observed by the apostle John when he was caught up into heaven and heard the same anthem, “Holy, Holy, Holy” (Rev 4:8). If God’s holiness is most proclaimed in heaven, it must be most proclaimed in our pulpit ministry.

Below, I want to give careful attention to this vitally important subject of the holiness of God. Then, I want to address some ways we must preach it.

## **The Meaning of God’s Holiness**

What does the holiness of God mean? The Hebrew *qadosh* comes from a Semitic root that means “a cutting.” The idea is an object cut into two pieces, resulting in the separation of the two halves. It conveys the idea of God’s set-apartness from His fallen creation. He is separated from the works of His hands, from the profane or the common. The Greek word *hagios* carries essentially the same meaning of separation.

## **Transcendent Holiness**

First and foremost, the holiness of God means that He is transcendent, totally distinct from everything outside of

# IT IS CRITICALLY IMPORTANT THAT WE HAVE THIS CLEAR UNDERSTANDING OF THE HOLINESS OF GOD AS WE PREACH HIS WORD. WE WILL NOT BE CLEAR IN THE PULPIT IF THIS TRUTH IS NOT CLEAR IN OUR OWN THINKING.

Himself. He is high and lifted up above the earth, lofty and exalted in the heavens. He towers over all that He has created. Simply put, God is a cut above us. He is above and beyond us. He is not on our level, but is entirely different from us. He vastly exceeds all comparisons with anyone or anything else. He is wholly other than us, unique, one of a kind.

In this exalted position, God is adorned with kingly majesty. As the Holy One upon His throne, God is robed with regal splendor. He is adorned with royal grandeur. He dwells in bright, effulgent light, shining brighter than ten thousand suns above. Radiant glory belongs to Him.

## Moral Holiness

Second, the holiness of God means that He is morally perfect. In the essence of His being, God is sinless and flawless. He is free from all moral imperfections. He is absent of any stain of defilement. In His holiness, God is intrinsically pure and infinitely good. He is separated from all sin. Being entirely perfect, He never errs. He never makes a mistake. He never misjudges any person. He never miscalculates any situation. He never misdirects any steps. He never misspeaks any pronouncement. He speaks only infallible, inerrant words.

## Judicial Holiness

Third, divine holiness demands that God exercise perfect justice. He rejects—and even hates—all that does not conform to His own holiness. At the same time, He loves all that conforms to Himself. Because God is holy, all sin must be punished to

the full extent of His law. Likewise, all obedience rightly motivated from the heart will be rewarded. He loves righteousness and hates wickedness. God hates sinners in their sin, and He loves those who are clothed in His righteousness and practice holiness.

## Comprehensive Holiness

Fourth, the holiness of God qualifies all His other attributes. His divine love is a *holy* love. His wrath is a *holy* wrath. All His motives are holy. Every decision of His will is holy. All His actions are holy. His every judgment is holy. Holiness is the first and foremost character quality that defines God. It is not that only one aspect of God is holy. Rather, the entire being of God is holy.

God's name is His "*holy* name" (Ps 145:21). His abode in heaven is His "*holy* dwelling place" (2 Chron 30:27). The Son of God is "the *Holy* One" (Mark 1:24). His Spirit is "the *Holy* Spirit" (Mark 1:8). The Word of God is "the *holy* Scriptures" (Rom 1:2). His people are "a *holy* people" (Deut 7:6) and a "*holy* priesthood" (1 Pet 2:5). In other words, everything about God is holy.

It is critically important that we have this clear understanding of the holiness of God as we preach His Word. We will not be clear in the pulpit if this truth is not clear in our own thinking. Having given this brief introduction to the definition of the holiness of God, it will be helpful for us to survey the Bible on this subject. This will sharpen the focus of our preaching on this cornerstone doctrine.



### The Survey of God's Holiness

From cover to cover, the holiness of God is highlighted throughout the Bible. This aspect of the divine character is clearly seen from the creation of the world in Genesis to its recreation in Revelation. In fact, the Scripture is so full of His holiness that it is impossible to address every reference in such a limited space. However, we will survey the high points of God's holiness as they are presented in the Old and New Testaments. We shall discover that this divine attribute is richly represented throughout Scripture.

### Holy Prohibition

The revelation of the holiness of God began in the Garden of Eden. His moral perfection was revealed when He made a clear distinction between good and evil:

The Lord God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die." (Gen 2:16-17)

From the very beginning, there was no blurring of the line God established distinguishing between good and evil. This was a black and white matter. Moreover, God is so holy that He announced that just one sin against His holy law—eating from the forbidden tree—would bring the immediate death penalty. The message resounded clearly: God is *that* holy.

### Holiness Violated

Tragically, the first couple defiantly disobeyed God and ate

the forbidden fruit. This was a blatant act of cosmic treason against the Creator. As God promised, their disobedience brought death (Gen 3:7-8). In the day he ate the fruit, Adam immediately died spiritually. There resulted separation between God and Adam.

God is so holy that this singular breach of His Word brought a severe curse upon all His creation. The curse of holy God fell upon the serpent (Gen 3:14-15), the woman (v. 16), and the man and the ground (vv. 17-19), and His blessings were forfeited (v. 24). The entire created order was subjected to the judgment of God.

### Severe Holiness

The absolute purity of God was later seen in the devastating flood that covered the earth. In the days of Noah, the human race had devolved into rampant wickedness (Gen 6:5-6, 11-12). So great was their evil that it grieved the heart of God. As a result, He pronounced His severe judgment upon the entire human race, with the exception of Noah and his family. He blotted out all human lives except those on the ark (Gen 7:23). This worldwide flood demonstrated the uncompromising holiness of God.

### Sign of Holiness

God later initiated the rite of circumcision with Abraham as a physical sign of what He must do in the hearts of His people. Circumcision pictured many things, not the least that God's people were to be cut off from the practices of this sinful world (Gen 17:10-14). Circumcision was given as a sign of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:1-3; 15:1-5), rep-



resenting that Israel had been *set apart* from the defilements of the surrounding nations to be His people. Circumcision also represented what God must do in their hearts. He must cut the heart in spiritual surgery and *set it apart* to Himself. This work of God would later be described as the new birth—making a people holy unto Himself.

### **The Ground is Holy**

Fast forward to Moses, who was tending his father-in-law's flock in the wilderness. He approached a bush that was burning, yet it was not consumed (Exod 3:1-2). The angel of the Lord appeared in the bush as a theophany, revealing the presence of God (Exod 3:1-2). The "blazing fire" of the incombustible bush manifested the holy presence of God. Moses was told to remove his sandals as a sign of reverence toward God. He was standing in a holy place, because holy God was uniquely revealing Himself. The ground was "holy ground," not because the dirt was clean, but because it was set apart from being common, as God Himself was present.

### **A Holy Nation**

At Mount Sinai, the holiness of God was further displayed when He descended upon Mount Sinai with fire and smoke. God said that His people had been set apart to Him in a way as no other nation was. As a kingdom of priests, they would


have access to God and serve Him (Exod 19:3, 5-6). They were chosen out of all the nations to belong to Him and be His possession. God issued the law that would define how they were to live in personal holiness. The Ten Commandments were a revelation of the holiness of God, as He issued this timeless moral standard for what He requires. His people must live distinctly differently from this sin-depraved world.

### **The Holy of Holies**

As prescribed in the ceremonial law, the divine design of the tabernacle was to be a visual demonstration of the holiness of God (Exod 26:31-34). In its interior, the Holy Place contained the altar of incense, the lampstand, and the table for the bread. The Most Holy Place—or the Holy of Holies—was within the Holy Place, separated by an inner veil. It contained the ark of the covenant and the mercy seat. The veil barred all except the high priest from entering the presence of holy God. This partition was to show the utter separation of holy God from His sinful creation.

### **Approaching Holy God**

The book of Leviticus presents the sacrificial system to be followed by the priests. The Lord cannot be approached by sinful man, but by a representative mediator—a priest—who must bring a sacrifice for the sins of the people. God required



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the burnt offering, which pictured a needed atonement for sin, enabling unholy people to approach holy God (Leviticus 1, 6). The sin offering represented an atonement for unintentional sins (Leviticus 4, 6). The guilt offering pictured an atonement for specific sins (Leviticus 5, 7). The lesson was clear that God is so holy that He cannot be approached apart from these divine specifications (Leviticus 8-9). This requirement would be perfectly fulfilled by Jesus Christ, as our high priest and perfect sacrifice.

### “I Will Be Treated as Holy”

In one dramatic episode, Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, the high priest, brought coals of fire to worship God that had not been prescribed by Him (Lev 6:12-13; 16:12). They offered unauthorized “strange fire” that violated what God had prescribed (Lev 10:1). God reacted violently and caused this strange fire to consume Nadab and Abihu. They had deviated from the divine standard in worship that had been set by God Himself. This blatant disregard for the holiness of God was a sin unto death.

### “I Am Holy”

In this Levitical context, God issued the designated dietary restrictions that commanded the separation of His people from the uncleanness of the world. God declared, “For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be

holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11:44). God then reinforced this statement of His holiness, “For I am the Lord who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God; thus you shall be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11:45). This self-identification of God as being holy was so important to the life of Israel that He repeated it for emphasis (Lev 19:2; 20:6).

### Holy Anger

After Israel entered the Promised Land, God issued a ban against taking the gold of a conquered Canaanite city. But a man named Achan defied this restriction and “took some of the things under the ban” (Josh 7:1). Achan’s transgression was in taking silver that had been forbidden. Israel suffered a devastating defeat because Achan’s sin was charged against the nation. This one sin against holy God brought defeat to the many. The holy anger of God was provoked, and Achan was stoned to death for this one sin against divine holiness.

### “No One Holy Like God”

After the birth of Samuel, Hannah sang her praises to God: “There is no one holy like the Lord, indeed, there is no one besides You, nor is there any rock like our God” (1 Sam 2:2). In her song, Hannah rejoiced that God is uniquely “holy,” unlike anyone else. His holiness sets Him apart in a classification by Himself. He alone is perfectly holy and always does what is right.

### **Holy Discipline**

The holiness of God was further put on display when David ordered the ark of the covenant, profaned by the Philistines, to be transported back to its resting place in Israel (1 Samuel 5-6). No one was allowed to touch the ark, because it represented the holiness of God. But when the ark was en route, it was momentarily jostled. Uzzah, one of two men leading the cart, instinctively reached out and touched the ark to steady it. Instantly, the anger of God's holiness burned against Uzzah and struck him dead. *That* is how holy God is.

### **The Holy Temple**

When King Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem, it was the house in which God was to be worshiped in the beauty of His holiness. Inside the temple was the Holy Place, the sacred space that occupied two-thirds of its structure. It was holy because the divine presence would fill it. The Holy of Holies occupied the other one-third of the interior space (1 Kings 6:16-17). This was intended to convey the immense magnitude of the holiness of God.

### **The Holy of Holies**

It was in the Holy of Holies that the glory of God would uniquely dwell. Inside this space, the ark of the covenant was placed lengthwise beneath the wings of the cherubim (1 Kings 8:6). The glory cloud was the manifestation of the glory of God (vv. 10-12). Solomon recognized the glory cloud as representing God's holy presence. As long as Solomon followed God's wisdom, his fame was great. But once he violated God's holiness by disobeying His Word, he suffered greatly (1 Kings 11:1-4). Eventually, the glory cloud would depart because of Israel's sin (Ezek 11:22-23).

### **"My Holy Mountain"**

The book of Psalms was compiled to lead the people of God in worshiping Him in the temple. The individual psalms were arranged in a theological order by compilers to convey the holiness of God. Many psalms that stress His moral purity and judicial holiness were intentionally placed at the beginning of the Psalter. This arrangement underscores the importance of His holiness to worshipers.

The second psalm reveals God's holy outrage toward the kings and peoples of this world who live in rebellion against Him (vv. 4-6). God laughs and scoffs at them, and He speaks to them in His anger. Despite their uprising, God will enthroned His Son upon His holy mountain and has commanded Him to break them with a rod of iron (vv. 7-9). In light of this impending wrath, sinners must repent, because His anger will soon be kindled (vv. 10-12).

In the fifth psalm, David records that holy God hates, de-

stroys, and abhors the unrepentant wicked (vv. 5-6). In light of such a sobering realization, David must bow in humble reverence before God and worship Him in His lovingkindness. A Holy God cannot be indifferent to sin, nor to sinners. He is not to be trifled with.

### **Holy Indignation**

The seventh psalm announces that God has declared a holy war against sinners. Holy God is angry with the wicked every day (v. 11). This divine anger is not merely reserved for the last day, but is presently directed toward unbelievers. David declares that His bow is already bent, and His arrow of wrath is pointed at the unrighteous, ready to be released this moment (vv. 12-13).

### **Holy Wrath**

The eleventh psalm further reinforces the holiness of God in that He remembers to slay the wicked (vv. 4-6), but saves the afflicted (v. 7). David worships the Lord in His "holy temple," which is the inner sanctuary of His dwelling place in heaven. There is no sin, injustice, or deceit in His presence. Because He is perfectly just in His holiness, God exercises only inflexible justice and equity toward His creatures. He hates the one who loves violence (v. 5) and judges the wicked (v. 6), yet loves righteousness (v. 7).

### **"Your Holy Hill"**

In the fifteenth psalm, David raises the question: who may come into God's holy presence to worship Him? He answers that because God is holy, He only receives worshipers who approach Him with personal integrity and purity.

### **"You are Holy"**

The twenty-second psalm looks beyond David, the author, to the greater King, Jesus Christ. David foretells the sin-bearing death of Christ upon the cross and the circumstances surrounding it. In that agonizing moment, He suffers a heart-rending separation from the Father because the Father is holy (v. 1). Nevertheless, Jesus draws strength from meditating upon the Father: "You are holy" (v. 3). As Jesus was made sin for us, He knew there was no other way to save sinners from the wrath of holy God except by enduring this death on their behalf.

### **"His Holy Place"**

In the twenty-fourth psalm, David again asks the question, "Who may stand in His holy place?" He answers that only those who come with "clean hands and a pure heart" (v. 4). This requirement for personal holiness is because God Himself is perfectly holy. Those who seek to worship Him

# GOD IS HOLY, HOLIER, HOLIEST—THE HOLIEST BEING IN THE UNIVERSE. ISAIAH WAS EXPOSED AND BECAME AWARE OF HIS OWN LACK OF HOLINESS AND CONFESSED HIS SIN. GOD FORGAVE HIS INIQUITY AND COMMISSIONED HIM TO PREACH HIS MESSAGE OF TRANSCENDENT HOLINESS.

in uprightness will receive a blessing (v. 5).

## “The Holy One”

The sixtieth psalm declares that God speaks holy words that are pure and undefiled (v. 6). The seventy-first, seventy-eighth, and eighty-ninth psalms affirm that God is “the Holy One.” In the eighty-ninth psalm, God says that He has sworn by His own holiness to keep the promise He made in the Davidic Covenant (v. 35). In the ninety-ninth psalm, the psalmist declares three times that “Holy is He,” and, therefore, worthy to be worshiped (vv. 3, 5, 9). The one-hundred eleventh psalm says God’s name is holy, meaning the entirety of His being is holy (v. 9). This recognition should lead all people to fear and revere Him (v. 10).

## Holy Hatred

In the book of Proverbs, Solomon announces that there are specific sins that holy God hates. These violations of His moral perfection are an affront to Him, which are haughty eyes, lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, heart scheming, sin-pursuing feet, false witness, and strife-spreading among brothers (Prov 6:16-19). The word “hates” (*sane*) means “to hate as one hates an enemy.” Truly, any sin is the avowed antithesis of holy God.

## “The Holy One of Israel”

The prophets of ancient Israel were divinely commissioned

messengers who encountered the holiness of God and boldly declared it. The prophet Isaiah addressed the people of God because their worship had devolved into a charade of hypocrisy. He announced, “They have despised the Holy One” (Isa 1:4). God rebuked them for their empty worship, announcing He had had enough, and refused their worship that mocked Him (vv. 11-17). Further, God declared His judgment upon their unholy lives (Isa 5:8-25). God described Himself again as “the Holy One of Israel” (v. 19) and stressed His divine anger toward their sin (vv. 24-25).

## “Holy, Holy, Holy”

When King Uzziah died, the people of Israel were shaken. It was in this crisis that Isaiah sought the Lord and was given a vision of God as “lofty and exalted” (Isa 6:1). He heard the seraphim around His throne crying out day and night, “Holy, Holy, Holy” (v. 3). This threefold repetition recognized His holiness to the superlative degree. God is holy, holier, holiest—the holiest being in the universe. Isaiah was exposed and became aware of his own lack of holiness and confessed his sin. God forgave his iniquity and commissioned him to preach His message of transcendent holiness.

## Visions of Holiness

Ezekiel likewise encountered the holiness of God. He was given a vision of His awesome radiance as the outshining of His resplendent holiness (Ezek 1:22-28). This knowledge of

the Holy One was a necessary prerequisite for the prophet to be used by God. The prophet Daniel also received a vision of God in His holiness (Dan 7:9-10). He saw “the Ancient of Days,” and “the hair of His head was like pure wool,” displaying His holiness that never wavers in His judgments.

### **Immutable Holiness**

The holiness of God is further revealed through the minor prophets, from Hosea to Malachi. The prophet Habakkuk stressed that the eyes of God are “too pure” to approve what is unholy (Hab 1:13). That is to say, God beholds His creatures with a penetrating gaze of holiness that cannot endorse anything that is contrary to His own flawless character. The Old Testament concludes with God announcing that He is immutable, an unchangeableness that includes His holy character. God declares through the last prophet, “I, the Lord, do not change” (Mal 3:6)—He is forever fixed in His holiness.

### **Continuity of Holiness**

The New Testament begins where the Old Testament concluded, focusing upon the holiness of God. This crowning attribute would chiefly be revealed in the second and third Persons of the Trinity. The incarnation of Jesus most fully reveals the holiness of God. In His entrance into this world, the sinless humanity of Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and Jesus was empowered by the Spirit throughout His earthly life and ministry. The Holy Spirit would even raise Jesus from the dead (Rom 1:4).

### **“The Holy Child”**

The virgin birth bears crystal clear evidence of the holiness of

God. An angel revealed to Joseph that Mary would conceive by the Holy Spirit and bear a Son (Matt 1:18). The angel Gabriel said to Mary that the Holy Spirit would produce in her “the holy Child” (Luke 1:35). Jesus Christ entered the fallen human race with a sinless human nature. Mary’s response was, “The Mighty One has done great things for me; And holy is His name” (Luke 1:49).

### **The Light of Holiness**

As Jesus entered this world, He was “the Light shin[ing] in the darkness” (John 1:5). The analogy of “Light” revealed Him to be the perfectly Holy One, who came into this unholy world. The shining purity of His holiness exposed the sinful deeds of men performed in darkness (John 3:18-21). As “the Light of the world” (John 8:12), Jesus was the perfect revelation of the holiness of God to fallen humanity.

### **Impeccable Holiness**

After Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Luke 4:1). Under this attack, Jesus resisted every assault of Satan and showed Himself to be an impeccable Savior incapable of sinning. This means more than that He was *able not to sin*. Rather, Jesus demonstrated He was *unable* to sin. In other words, He had no capacity to sin. Jesus truly is the holy Son of God, perfectly qualified to be our Savior.

### **A Kingdom of Holiness**

The first recorded sermon by Jesus was the Sermon on the Mount, which began with the Beatitudes. These describe the

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# JESUS ESTABLISHED THE NECESSITY FOR PERSONAL HOLINESS IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD. THE CITIZENS IN THE KINGDOM SHOULD EMULATE THE MORAL PURITY OF THE KING.

heart attitudes of those who are citizens in His kingdom of holiness. He declares that true believers have recognized their spiritual bankruptcy, being “poor in spirit” (Matt 5:3), and “mourn” over their spiritual poverty with deep brokenness (v. 4). They humble themselves in meekness (v. 5) and hunger for the righteousness they do not possess (v. 6). Only those who are “pure in heart...shall see God” (v. 8).

## Holiness of Heart

Jesus then gave the true interpretation of the moral law. He said that even though someone has not committed the physical act of murder, he has, nevertheless, committed murder in his heart if he has anger toward another person (Matt 5:21-26). Jesus further explained that even though someone has not committed the physical act of adultery, if he has lust for a person other than his spouse, he has committed adultery in his heart (vv. 27-30). By this, Jesus established the necessity for personal holiness in the kingdom of God. The citizens in the kingdom should emulate the moral purity of the King.

## Perfectly Holy

In this same sermon, Jesus announces the standard that God has set for all people: “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). “Perfect” (*teleios*) means “to reach an intended end or completion.” God requires in His people the absolute moral purity of His own holiness. This standard is nothing new, but a restatement of what God said fourteen centuries earlier: “You shall be holy for I am holy” (Lev 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:26). Nothing has changed in the New Testament—not God’s holiness, nor His demand for holiness.

## Holy Is Your Name

As this sermon progressed, Jesus gave His model prayer (Matt

6:9-15). He instructed His disciples to begin their prayers by acknowledging the holiness of God: “Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name” (Matt 6:9). “Hallowed” (*hagiastō*) means “to make holy, to set apart from the common, to regard as holy.” We must recognize and revere the transcendent purity of God. He alone possesses perfect holiness and should be upheld as the One who is morally perfect. God’s “name” represents all He is. Thus, His entire divine being is wholly holy.

## “The Holy One of God”

In His public ministry, Jesus was often recognized as the Holy One. He once entered a city and the demons cried out, “I know who You are—the Holy One of God!” (Luke 4:34). When Jesus performed the miraculous catch of fish, the disciples were gripped with terror as they realized that they were in the presence of One who was holy God. Peter fell down at His feet, saying, “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!” (Luke 5:8). On another occasion, Peter testified, “You are the Holy One of God” (John 6:69). He once again became painfully aware that he was in the presence of holy God in human flesh.

## Good and Holy

Jesus stressed the holiness of God in witnessing to the rich young ruler, who questioned Him, saying, “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 18:18). Jesus responded, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone” (v. 19). Jesus was teaching him that God alone is “good,” meaning morally good. He must recognize that Jesus Himself is God, entirely holy and good.

## “Holy Father”

In His High Priestly Prayer, Jesus confessed the perfect ho-



liness of God the Father. Jesus addressed Him: “Holy Father, keep them in Your name, the name which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are” (John 17:11). Jesus knew that holiness belongs to His Father. “Your name” means the character of the Father, which is holy. Jesus acknowledged that God had supremely revealed His holiness in His incarnation.

### **Recognized Holy**

When Jesus stood trial before Pilate, He was interrogated and found to be blameless. Pilate concluded, “I find no fault in Him” (Luke 23:4, 14, 22). The thief on the cross recognized moral perfection in Jesus: “This man has done nothing wrong” (Luke 23:41). In the same way, the centurion at the foot of the cross agreed. As he watched Jesus draw His final breath and cry out to God, the centurion declared, “Certainly this man was innocent” (Luke 23:47). Even human testimony bears witness to the flawless holiness of Jesus Christ.

### **“The Holy One”**

The book of Acts further reveals the holiness of Jesus Christ. On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached and declared the holiness of Jesus Christ. Citing Psalm 16:10, he proclaimed, “YOU WILL NOT ABANDON . . . YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY” (Acts 2:27). Peter soon thereafter healed the lame man and preached a powerful sermon, declaring Jesus Christ to be “the Holy and Righteous One” (Acts 3:14). When the first believers prayed, Jesus was recognized as “Your holy

servant” (Acts 4:27). Paul also preached that Jesus is “YOUR HOLY ONE” (Acts 13:35).

### **The Holy Scriptures**

The Apostle Paul identified the Bible as the “holy Scriptures” (Rom 1:2), the inerrant Word of God. The holy character of God is revealed in His written Word. Paul describes Scripture later as “the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy” (Rom 7:12). It is perfect, without any errors, because God, its author, is holy.

### **Our Holy Sin-Bearer**

In the message of reconciliation, Paul writes, “[The Father] made [the Son] who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor 5:21). Jesus Christ was the sinless Son of God, who became the sin-bearer of His people. In the great exchange of the cross, all the sins of those who would believe in Jesus were transferred to Him, and His perfect righteousness would be imputed to them.

### **Flaming Holiness**

When Jesus returns, He will come “in flaming fire” (2 Thess 1:7). This “fire” represents His sin-consuming holiness. As a blazing inferno of wrath, He will be “dealing out retribution to those who do not know God” (v. 8). The Son of God will punish sinners, because He is perfectly holy. These will “pay the penalty of eternal destruction” in hell (v. 9), a punishment



necessitated by His holiness.

### **Unapproachable Holiness**

The Apostle Paul further writes about God's holiness that He "dwells in unapproachable light whom no man has seen or can see" (1 Tim 6:16). No one can look directly upon the full glory of God's utter holiness and live. God is transcendent, above and beyond us, separate from sin. He is too holy to be viewed by mere mortal eyes in His state of moral perfection.

### **Tempted, Yet Holy**

In the general epistles—Hebrews through Jude—the holiness of God continues to receive a special focus. The writer to the Hebrews makes strong references to the absolute holiness of Jesus Christ. This author affirms His perfectly sinless nature and spotless life. Jesus "has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15). Though tempted by Satan, Jesus never succumbed to his seductive lures. Instead, He always resisted the flaming darts of the evil one in unending holiness.

### **Holy, Innocent, undefiled**

The author of Hebrews teaches that Jesus is our great High Priest who represents His people before the Father. He is "holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted in the heavens" (Heb 7:26). "Holy" (*hosios*) means He is pious, without any moral pollution, free from wickedness. "Innocent" (*akakos*) reveals that Jesus is without guile, free from guilt. "Undefiled" (*amiantos*) indicates He is without any inward contamination of sin. "Separated from sinners" conveys He is entirely unlike sinful humanity. "Exalted above the heavens" means Jesus is transcendent, majestic, high and lifted up.

### **Impeccable Holiness**

James also lays great stress on the holiness of God. He writes,

"God cannot be tempted," meaning He is untemptable (*apeirastos*; 1:13). He is without the inward moral capacity to be swayed by temptation. Holy God is invincible in the face of any seductive lures of evil. His holiness and sin's lure are mutually exclusive. He has no vulnerability to that which is unholy. He is untouched and uncontaminated by any evil and sin.

### **Unshifting Holiness**

James further states that God is "the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow" (James 1:17). That is, He is unchanging in His being of holiness. God is incapable of any "variation" in His holy character. There can be no "shifting shadow" in His moral perfection. He is forever holy, both throughout time and into the ages to come.

### **"I Am Holy"**

Peter reaffirms the holiness of God as was taught in the Old Testament (1 Pet 1:15-16). Peter states, "It is written" and quotes Leviticus 11:44; 19:2; 20:7. This indicates that the holiness of God is not a new revelation in New Testament times. God Himself says, "I am holy," which declares He constantly exists in moral perfection. Within His own being, He is without any defilement of sin. Moreover, He is incapable of it, being perfectly pure in character, thought, words, and ways. God's own holy character is the positive standard He requires of His people.

### **Unblemished Holiness**

Peter further states that the Son of God shares the same holiness as the Father. As our sacrificial Lamb, Jesus was "unblemished and spotless" (1 Pet 1:19). He was without any moral blemish throughout His entire earthly life. "Unblemished" (*amōmos*) indicates He was "without moral blame, faultless." "Spotless" (*aspilos*) means Jesus was "free from the stain of sin." Only One who is without sin could become the

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# THOSE IN GOD'S PRESENCE CONTINUE TO DECLARE HIS DIVINE HOLINESS TO THE SUPERLATIVE DEGREE. AS THE ONE WHO "WAS," "IS," AND "IS TO COME," GOD REMAINS UNCHANGABLE IN HIS HOLINESS.

bearer of the sins of others and die in their place for their sins.

## **Holy Words**

Peter goes on to quote Isaiah 53:9, which states that Jesus "committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth" (1 Pet 2:22). This teaches that He was sinless, perfectly holy, having kept the law throughout His life. There was no "deceit" in His mouth, meaning no sinful corruption was spoken by Him. He never uttered anything dishonest, false, or treacherous. Whenever Jesus opened His mouth, He never distorted the truth.

## **God Is Holy**

The apostle John reinforced this same truth about the holiness of God. He writes, "God is Light" (1 John 1:5), conveying the absolutely holy nature of God. He possesses a flawlessly pure character with moral excellence. This holiness describes His entire being. His mind, affections, and will are perfectly holy. John adds, "In Him there is no darkness" (v. 5). That is, there is no impurity, evil, or falsehood in Him.

## **Jesus Is Holy**

John continues by stating that Jesus Christ is perfectly "righteous" in His holy nature (1 John 2:29). This means He always acts according to His own holy character. The reference to righteousness refers to His judicial holiness. When He appears, some believers will "shrink away from Him in shame at His coming" (v. 28). This is because they did not abide in Him as they should have. On that last day, He will reward other believers for their faithful service to Him. John adds, "In Him

there is no sin (1 John 3:5), reaffirming His perfect holiness.

## **Holy Like White Wool**

In the book of Revelation, the apostle John records that he was unexpectedly given a vision of the glorified Christ (Rev 1:14-16). John saw the head of Jesus Christ "like white wool," and His hair was "like snow" (v. 14). Both images represented His perfect holiness. The Lord's "eyes like a flame of fire" were searching for holiness in His churches (vv. 14). Jesus had "feet like burnished bronze," standing in judgment over the churches (v. 15). His voice was "like the sound of many waters," drowning out every other voice (v. 15). "His face was like the sun," radiating with His holiness in full splendor (v. 16). So overwhelming was this vision of Jesus' grandeur that John went unconscious and fell at His feet (v. 17)

## **"Holy Is the Lord"**

John was caught up into heaven and was confronted with the holiness of God. Even in heaven, a sea of crystal-like glass separated God from glorified saints (Rev 4:6). Four living creatures were crying out day and night, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come" (v. 8). This is the same threefold repetition of God's holiness that was heard in Isaiah's vision. Those in God's presence continue to declare His divine holiness to the superlative degree. As the One who "was," "is," and "is to come," God remains unchangeable in His holiness.

## **Holy Wrath of the Lamb**

In the last days, the great Tribulation will further demonstrate

the holiness of God and His utter rejection of sin. It will be a time for the unleashing of God's holy wrath upon this rebellious world in unprecedented measure. Seven seal judgments will be executed by Jesus Christ, followed by seven trumpet judgments and seven bowl judgments. These will pour out His divine anger upon depraved humanity in an unprecedented manner. These judgments will shatter a Christ-rejecting world.

#### **“His Judgments Are Holy”**

Before Jesus returns to the earth, a celebration in heaven will erupt, giving glory to God, because His severe wrath judged this sinful world (Rev 19:1-4). At His second coming, Jesus will unveil a terrifying display of His holiness (vv. 11-16). He “judges and wages war” (v. 11), wearing “a robe dipped in blood”—the blood of His enemies (v. 13). Out of His mouth comes “a sharp sword” (v. 15), representing His power to kill His enemies.

#### **Holy Judgment**

In the end, all unbelievers will be judged by Jesus Christ at His “great white throne” (Rev 20:11-15). It will be a terrifying display of His holiness upon “the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars” (Rev 21:8).

“The book of life” will be opened to show that their names were never recorded within it. “The books” will be opened to reveal the full record of their sins. Every sin will bring the corresponding right punishment. They will be cast out into “the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death” (v. 8).

#### **“Holy Dwelling Place”**

The new heaven and new earth will be an eternal dwelling place without any sin. The “holy city, new Jerusalem” will come down “as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev 21:2). Holy God will live among His holy people and be their God. This celestial city will be inhabited by those “who wash their robes” in Jesus’ blood and are made holy (Rev 22:14). Outside the holy city are “the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying” (v. 15). No one unclean shall enter into the presence of God, who is infinitely holy.

#### **The Preaching of God's Holiness**

Having surveyed the Old and New Testaments, the question must be raised: How must we preach the holiness of God? Because His divine purity is primary in any consideration of God, we must give careful thought to this divine attribute,



# THE SCRIPTURE SPEAKS MOST POINTEDLY ABOUT THE HOLINESS OF GOD. LITTLE IS VEILED IN THE BIBLE ABOUT THIS DIVINE ATTRIBUTE. EVEN SO, EVERY PREACHER SHOULD SPEAK SO DIRECTLY TO HIS HEARERS.

must occupy our pulpit ministry. To be sure, the following must mark our proclamation of the holiness of God:

## **Biblical**

One, *preach it biblically*. We must be committed to preach only that which the Scripture teaches. All that we declare about the holiness of God must arise out of these texts of the Bible and others. We must proclaim how God has revealed Himself in His Word and not in our own thoughts or imaginations. Scripture alone must define our preaching of God.

## **Comprehensive**

Two, *preach it comprehensively*. We must preach the holiness of God from every portion of Scripture. Let us not restrict ourselves to only one part of the Bible as we preach divine holiness. The Old Testament is fertile soil from which to expound the Lord's moral and judicial perfection. Every section of the New Testament yields many vistas from which to behold God's transcendent glory. Let us avail ourselves of the whole counsel of God in His holiness.

## **Direct**

Three, *preach it directly*. The Scripture speaks most pointedly about the holiness of God. Little is veiled in the Bible about this divine attribute. Even so, every preacher should speak so directly to his hearers. The holiness of God is seen in countless scenes in the Bible and is made known in many hard sayings. These passages must be displayed to our hearers in their full potency, without any reservation.

## **Constant**

Four, *preach it constantly*. The holiness of God should be taught on a regular basis. Many times, it is explicitly stated in passages being preached. In these instances, we must let the Scripture speak for itself. Other times, His holiness will be introduced as an implication of the text or as a cross reference. Either way, divine holiness should be a regular refrain in the pulpit, often addressed, as it is clearly traced throughout the Bible.

## **Pastoral**

Five, *preach it pastorally*. Expounding the holiness of God requires a shepherd's heart for His flock. It would be easy to be overbearing with the potency of this truth and to run roughshod over people. The one who preaches divine holiness must speak with words full of divine grace. Pastoral sensitivity and loving patience are required to maintain the proper balance, lest we come across as overbearing and intimidating.

## **Passionate**

Six, *preach it passionately*. Expositing the Scripture that addresses the holiness of God requires our fervency of heart as we deliver this truth. Let us never be coldly academic or stoic as we preach this divine attribute. This doctrine begs for our wholehearted pulpit delivery in the energy of the Holy Spirit. We must be enlivened as we preach this truth.

## **Positive**

Seven, *preach it positively*. Rather than emphasizing where people have fallen short of the holiness of God—*who can be*

*as holy as God is holy?*—we must preach this truth in a most positive manner. Let us affirm to people the beauty of God's holiness. Further, we should stress that divine joy follows the knowledge of His holiness.

**Practical**

Eight, *preach it practically*. We must give practical steps to our listeners concerning how they can grow to know God in His holiness. We must speak to them about the ordinary means of grace which will enable them to grow to know God. We must show how they can rightly respond to the holiness of God.

**Patient**

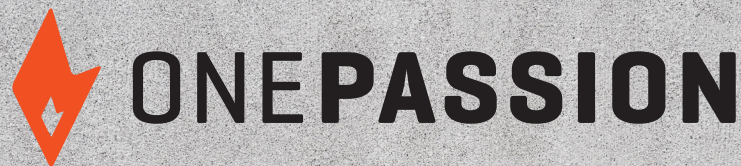
Nine, *preach it patiently*. Those who hear us will be at different places in their spiritual lives. Some will be immediately responsive to the holiness of God. Others will not be immediately accepting of the difficult aspects of this truth. We must bear in mind that this will be more of a commentary on

this latter person that on the appropriateness of the theme of holiness. Continue to preach it patiently to them.

**Evangelistic**

Ten, *preach it evangelistically*. Those who are living outside of Christ need to be awakened to their lost spiritual condition. The holiness of God exposes their sin and lost condition. Such a person must repent and turn to Jesus Christ to be made right with holy God. Preaching the holiness of God elevates Him and humbles man, exposing our need for grace, and often leads to the conversion of souls.

Great preachers preach the greatness of God. The holiness of God is the summation of all that He is. It identifies His complete separation from evil. It recognizes Him as being absolutely untainted by any evil. It views God as uncontaminated by any error or wrongdoing. It reveals God as reigning with perfect sovereignty. Let us be those men who faithfully proclaim His holy character. ♦



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# God's Holiness *and* Your Worship

JOHN MACARTHUR

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you worship God? Is it His infinite wisdom, His unlimited power, or His ultimate sovereignty? Is it some attribute or characteristic you find particularly appealing, awe-inspiring, or comforting?

Knowing that God is immutable, omnipotent, omniscient, and omniscient is significant, but those attributes give limited insight into what God expects of us. What is it—beyond His unchanging, all-powerful, infinitely knowing presence—that compels us to worship?

It is basically this: God is holy. Of all His attributes, holiness is the one that most uniquely describes Him and in reality is a summation of all His other attributes. The word *holiness* refers to His separateness, His otherness, the fact that He is unlike any other being. It indicates His complete and infinite perfection. Holiness is the attribute of God that binds all the others together. Properly understood, it will revolutionize the quality of our worship.

When they exalt God, the angels don't say, "Eternal, Eternal, Eternal"; they don't say, "Faithful, Faithful, Faithful"; "Wise, Wise, Wise"; or "Mighty, Mighty, Mighty." They say, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God, the Almighty" (Rev 4:8). His holiness is the crown of all that He is.

Exodus 15:11 asks, "Who is like You among the gods, O Lord? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, awesome in praises, working wonders?" The answer, of course, is that

no being is equal to God in holiness. In fact, holiness is so uniquely and exclusively an attribute of God that Psalm 111:9 says, "Holy and awesome is His name." That doesn't merely mean that the name of God is sacred and sanctified; it means holiness is so much the essence of God's character that *Holy* is one of the names God goes by.

## **The Standard of Absolute Holiness**

God doesn't conform to a holy standard; He *is* the standard. He never does anything wrong, He never errs, He never makes a misjudgment, He never causes something to happen that isn't right. There are no degrees to His holiness. He is holy, flawless, without error, without sin, fully righteous—utterly, absolutely, infinitely holy.

To dwell in God's presence, one must be holy. That was demonstrated when the angels sinned. God immediately cast them out and prepared a place for them separated from His presence. When sinful humans choose not to come to God, when they choose to reject Jesus Christ, their ultimate end is to be sent to the place prepared for the devil and his angels, out of the presence of God.

Hebrews 12:14 clearly states that apart from holiness, no one will see the Lord. The problem for us is that God's standard of holiness is absolute perfection. His own unblemished holiness is the ultimate criterion by which we

# OUR VERY BEST, MOST CHARITABLE HUMAN WORKS ARE ALL DEEPLY FLAWED BECAUSE OF OUR SINFULNESS. THEY ARE LIKE GARBAGE IN GOD'S HOLY ESTIMATION. BUT HE IMPUTES HIS OWN PERFECT RIGHTEOUSNESS TO THOSE WHO REPENT OF THEIR SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS AND TRUST CHRIST AS LORD AND SAVIOR.

are judged. Peter articulated that truth when he wrote, “It is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet 1:16). Jesus said the same thing: “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48).

This presents a seemingly impossible barrier for fallen humanity because we all have sinned. We are fatally blemished by our own sinfulness. What God requires of us, we simply cannot attain on our own. Indeed, our very nature is tainted to the core with sin. Sinfulness has corrupted every aspect of our mind, our hearts, and our wills. We *cannot* be perfect; we are already deeply imperfect—seriously and indelibly corrupted with evil desires, evil motives, evil thoughts, and evil deeds. We thus have no hope whatsoever of ever obtaining for ourselves the perfect holiness God requires.

## **Holiness and Imputation**

But God’s plan of salvation solves that whole dilemma in a remarkable and multifaceted way. God’s own perfect righteousness is imputed—or put to the account of—every sinner who believes in Jesus Christ. Just as Christ took our sin and paid for it, we get credit for His righteousness and are rewarded for it. “[God] made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor 5:21).

Authentic faith therefore entails shedding every pretense of our own righteousness and confessing that we are hopeless sinners. In fact, even the most fastidious attempts to earn merit of our own count for nothing in God’s sight. Our very best, most charitable human works are all deeply flawed because of our sinfulness. They are like garbage in God’s holy estimation. But He imputes His own perfect righteousness to those who repent of their self-righteousness and trust Christ as Lord and Savior (see Phil 3:8–9). That gives us an immediate right standing before God: “Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God” (Rom 5:1–2). “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1).

Having already justified us and clothed us in a garment of perfect righteousness (not one of our own making, but Christ’s righteousness imputed to us), God is now conforming us to greater and greater Christlikeness, thus making us fit for heaven (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18). When we die, or when Christ returns, that process will be instantly completed in our glorification (1 John 3:2).

That is why we speak of God’s holiness as one of His *communicable* attributes—one of the perfections of God that His



creatures can, to some degree, share and participate in. God conforms us to the perfection of His own holy standard. He instantly gives us a righteous standing, and then over time He makes us perfectly holy. That is a fair summary of what God does for us in salvation.

### Holiness and Hating Sin

God's holiness is best seen in His hatred of sin. God cannot tolerate sin; He is totally removed from it. Amos 5:21–23 records God's strong words to those attempting to worship Him while polluted with sin:

I hate, I reject your festivals, nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; and I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps.

That does not mean that God hates sacrifices and offerings and festivals and music as a *means* of worship. God desires all those things, because He instituted them. Rather, the point is God hates *any* kind of worship that is tainted with sin.

God doesn't want you to sin, even if it would make your testimony more exciting, or display His grace to a greater degree (Rom 6:1–2). He never approves of sin. He will not necessarily keep you from sinning, and He may even use your sin to further His own wise and holy purposes. But He never sanctions or condones sin, and even when someone's sin helps fulfill the outworking of God's eternal plan, it is always the creature, not God, who is the agent responsible for the sin. God never actively tempts or entices anyone to sin, and

He Himself cannot be tempted to sin (James 1:13). Sin is the object of His displeasure. God loves holiness. Psalm 11:7 says, "For the Lord is righteous, He loves righteousness."


### Worship the Lord in the Beauty of Holiness

Acknowledging and understanding the Lord's utter holiness is essential to true worship. Psalm 96:2–6 exhorts us to:

Sing to the Lord, bless His name;  
Proclaim good tidings of His salvation from day to day.  
Tell of His glory among the nations,  
His wonderful deeds among all the peoples.  
For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised;  
He is to be feared above all gods.  
For all the gods of the peoples are idols,  
But the Lord made the heavens.  
Splendor and majesty are before Him,  
Strength and beauty are in His sanctuary.

That describes acts of worship. Verse 9 makes the key statement: "Worship the Lord in holy attire; tremble before Him, all the earth." "Holy attire" means the spiritual clothing of holiness. "Tremble before Him" implies fear. In fact, the King James Version translates that verse, "O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness: fear before him, all the earth."

Here we are introduced to the frequent biblical connection between God's holiness and fear on the part of the worshiper. It is a fear that grows out of an overwhelming sense of unworthiness in the presence of pure holiness.



**ACKNOWLEDGING AND  
UNDERSTANDING THE  
LORD'S UTTER HOLINESS IS  
ESSENTIAL TO TRUE WORSHIP.**



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# God's Majestic *and* Moral Holiness

JOEL R. BEEKE

The church never rises above its view of God. Where small views of God prevail, there will be little spiritual vitality and godliness among God's people. When divine attributes are diminished, ignored, or denied, the church's worship will be empty, cold, and even idolatrous. Many professing Christians view God as little more than a big man in the sky who loves people and wants them to be happy in this life. Where such a view exists, one finds a religion altogether different from biblical Christianity. The Bible sets before us a great God of infinite power, matchless grace, and tender mercy (Ps 145:3, κτν), a God who is "a consuming fire" (Heb 12:29). In all that He is and does, the true God is a holy God.

Holiness is essential to God (Isa 57:15); it is the heart of everything the Bible declares about Him. His justice is holy justice; His wisdom is holy wisdom; His power is holy power; His grace is holy grace. God's holiness is the crowning jewel of all His other attributes. John Howe defines God's holiness as "a transcendental attribute that, as it were, runs through the rest, and casts lustre upon them. It is an attribute of attributes . . . and so it is the very lustre and glory of His other perfections." Isaiah calls God "the Holy One" twenty-six times. In fact, the word "holy" precedes God's name more than any other adjective. God reveals His holiness in His works (Ps 145:17), in His law (Ps 19:8–9), and especially at the cross of Christ (Matt 27:46).

What is God's holiness? To be "holy" means to be "sacred," "consecrated," or "set apart from what is ordinary and set against what is unclean." God is "the Holy One" (Isa 40:25) and source of all other holiness. God's holiness is the majesty of all His attributes that sets Him apart from all others. The Bible uses the word *holy* to describe both God's infinite majesty and His moral excellence.

God's holiness means that *He is set apart by His glory, for His glory*. The statement "He is set apart by His glory" emphasizes that God is other than all creatures. In a sense, to say that God is holy is to say that God is God. No one else can compare. The statement "He is set apart for His glory" highlights that God is ethically other than His fallen creatures, be they angels or men. He is set against all that is impure and zealously committed to displaying the perfections of His character. In this sense, God's holiness refers to His moral excellence, righteousness, love, goodness, and justice.

Psalm 99 sets before us God's holiness from these two perspectives. First, his holiness is connected to His majestic reign as the great King: "The LORD reigneth; let the people tremble: he sitteth between the cherubims; let the earth be moved. The Lord is great in Zion; and he is high above all the people. Let them praise thy great and terrible name; for it is holy" (Ps 99:1–3). God's holiness calls us to fear and praise Him. But the psalmist goes on to connect God's holiness to

His justice and righteousness: “Thou dost establish equity, thou executest judgment and righteousness in Jacob. Exalt ye the LORD our God, and worship at his footstool; for he is holy” (Ps 99:4–5). Since God is the perfect King, He loves what is right, speaks what is right, does what is right, and rewards what is right. Hence, He is the holy enemy of all that is morally unclean, unjust, and unloving.

The church of the twenty-first century stands in desperate need of rediscovering the holiness of God. We need to see God high and lifted up in His majestic splendor and moral perfection. Is anything more vital to the wellbeing of the church than to know and savor God as He truly is? Let us approach this subject of divine holiness with reverence and dependence upon the Holy Spirit. Like Psalm 99, let us grapple with God’s majestic holiness and His moral holiness as it is revealed in Scripture.

### **God’s Majestic Holiness**

First, God reveals Himself as majestic in holiness. When Moses approached the burning bush, the Lord commanded him to come no closer. The reason given was that “the place whereon thou standest is holy ground” (Exod 3:5). Moses stood on holy ground because he was in the presence of the holy God. This is the first direct reference to God’s holiness in the Bible.

God then revealed His name to His prophet. He said, “I Am that I Am” (v. 14). By this name, God was setting forth His transcendent majesty, absolute independence, and unchangeable perfection. While everything in the created order has its existence from God, the Lord has existence in Himself. While every creature is utterly dependent upon God, the Lord is dependent upon nothing and no one to be who He is. He is altogether unique in His being. He is the only one who could say, “I Am that I Am.”

### **Songs of Majestic Holiness**

We find the next reference to holiness in Moses’ song of praise after the exodus. God had displayed His sovereign power over the greatest world power of the day. He sent plagues to liberate His people from Egyptian bondage. He parted the waters of the Red Sea so that His people could cross over on dry ground. He destroyed the Egyptian army by causing the sea to crash down upon them. And Moses leads the people to praise God for this gracious deliverance. In Exodus 15:11 he sings, “Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?” These rhetorical questions indicate that there is none like Israel’s God. He is “glorious in holiness.” The main theme of this song is God’s glory, strength, power, and fearsome excellence. This, of course, was displayed in his destruction of

the Egyptians and the deliverance of Israel. The song ends in verse 18 with the words, “The Lord shall reign for ever and ever.” God is “glorious in holiness,” then, because He is the sovereign King: “The kingdom is the LORD’s; and He is the governor among the nations” (Ps 22:28).

Later in redemptive history, we find another song of praise sung by Hannah. The Lord had answered her prayers and given her a son. In 1 Samuel 2:2 she declares, “There is none holy as the Lord: for there is none beside thee: neither is there any rock like our God.” Again, the Scriptures link God’s holiness to His supreme and unique glory. Hannah went on to sing of God’s knowledge and control over war, childbirth, death, wealth, and social status (vv. 3–8). God reveals His holiness as the incomparable Lord. He is majestic and almighty, glorious and sovereign.

### ***A Vision of Majestic Holiness***

The climactic Old Testament revelation of God’s holiness appears in a vision of Isaiah. In Isaiah 6, the prophet records how he saw “the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple” (v. 1). Isaiah is given a glimpse into the throne room of heaven. He beholds God clothed in majestic splendor, ruling and reigning. But this God is not alone. Heavenly spirits fly above the divine throne, calling out, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory” (v. 3). No other attribute of God is repeated three times like this. Hebrew employs repetition for superlatives. God’s holiness is holiness of the highest degree. Edward Young writes, “As here used, holiness signifies the entirety of the divine perfection which separates God from His creation.”

The emphasis of Isaiah’s vision falls upon God’s sovereignty and greatness. He refers to God as “the Lord” (v. 1), “the Lord of hosts” (v. 3), and “the King” (v. 5). The vision depicts God’s supremacy over angelic powers and earthly kings. We find here the angels covering themselves in God’s holy presence. Why? Not because they have sinned, but because even sinless spirits are overwhelmed by the God who dwells in unapproachable light. R. C. Sproul rightly states that God’s holiness “signifies everything about God that sets Him apart from us and makes Him an object of awe, adoration, and dread to us.”

The thrice holy Lord of Isaiah’s vision is the triune God. In this vision, emphasizing God’s uniqueness of being, we also find God’s personal plurality. The Lord asks, “Who will go for us?” (v. 8). Who is this plural “us” referring to? It is not referring to the angels or any other creature, for God will not share His glory with another. Rather, it is a reference to the plurality of persons in the Godhead, later more fully revealed as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In John 12:41, the apostle

# THE CHURCH OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY STANDS IN DESPERATE NEED OF REDISCOVERING THE HOLINESS OF GOD. WE NEED TO SEE GOD HIGH AND LIFTED UP IN HIS MAJESTIC SPLendor AND MORAL PERFECTION.

tells us that the One whom Isaiah saw was the preincarnate Son of God. The divine “us” also includes the third person of the Trinity. The Apostle Paul in Acts 28:25–27 ascribes the speech of Isaiah 6:9–10 to the Holy Spirit. Yet these are the words that Isaiah attributed to “the voice of the Lord” whom he beheld (Isa. 6:8). These three, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are one holy God. The triune God is fearful and majestic in glory.

This, then, is the first and foundational meaning of God’s holiness: His absolute sovereignty as God. He is exalted above all creatures in every way. There is none like Him. There are none to whom He can be compared. And we see that when Isaiah encounters this thrice holy God, it has two effects upon him. He prostrates himself in humble worship, and he gives himself in zealous service.

In the presence of such a great and holy God, Isaiah was exposed in his creaturely finitude and corrupt fallenness. He was utterly undone when he beheld this holy King (Isa. 6:5). A sight of our holy God enthroned on high will bring us low, it will cause our souls to unravel. But it will do so in such a way that evokes profound worship.

God alone is worthy of our worship. The tallest mountains and deepest seas are as piles of dust or drops of water compared to his immeasurable greatness. The sun, which we cannot view directly, is a faint spark compared to the infinite brightness of His glory. Let us, therefore, not give our adoration to any man, woman, or other creature. Even if an angel of heaven were to appear to us, he would be a mere messenger and servant of God. God alone must be our God. He alone must be the object of our worship and service. For God alone

is “majestic in holiness.”

Isaiah’s vision of God’s transcendence led not only to humble worship, however, but also to consecration to God’s service. The Lord asks, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” (v. 8). God is looking for a man who will be His prophet to His rebellious people. As He would go on to describe, this would be a very difficult job marked by great opposition and suffering (vv. 9–13). Ridicule, rejection, and poverty were central to the job description.

Who would be foolish enough to willingly undergo such immense trials and sorrows? Isaiah was. Without any hesitation, he said, “Here am I; send me” (v. 8). His view of the Lord not only overwhelmed him with fear, but made him willing to serve God no matter the cost.

Jesus said it would be a costly thing to follow Him. Christian discipleship is characterized by bearing the cross. We will be scorned by the world. The gospel we preach will be rejected by men. What will enable us to serve God faithfully in the face of such hardship? Many answers could be given, but surely one dominant reason is a vision of God’s majestic holiness. When we see who God is, we realize what an immense privilege it is to bear His name and engage in His mission. Moses willingly forsook Egypt and stood defiant before Pharaoh, “for he endured, as seeing him who is invisible” (Heb 11:27). Even if it means suffering and death, it is the highest of honors to serve the King of the universe. Knowing God as holy leads us to say, “Here am I; send me.” It causes us to realize how fleeting, feeble, and miniscule our lives are. And it propels us to spend our lives in the service of One who is infinitely and eternally great.

# IF WE COULD BUT CATCH A GLIMPSE OF GOD'S MAJESTY, WE WOULD QUICKLY SEE HOW FOOLISH SUCH A SELF-FOCUSED LIFE IS. BEHOLDING THE HOLINESS OF THE LORD WILL REORIENT THE ENTIRETY OF OUR EXISTENCE TOWARD GOD.

In short, a vision of God's majestic holiness delivers us from our radical selfishness. It helps us to see ourselves in proper perspective. You and I are but dust. Our life is but a vapor that quickly vanishes (James 4:14). Some of us are consumed with ourselves. Every relationship we have, every item we purchase, every activity we engage in is all about us. This is the way of sin to which all of us are prone by nature.

If we could but catch a glimpse of God's majesty, we would quickly see how foolish such a self-focused life is. Beholding the holiness of the Lord will reorient the entirety of our existence toward God. It will enable us joyfully to live out the command of Paul, "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31). You were created to live for something so much bigger than yourself and your own little kingdom. The holy God of the universe beckons you to know Him and serve Him. What higher privilege could there be than this?

## **God's Moral Holiness**

God also reveals His holiness in His opposition to sin, and to uncleanness. God is not only set apart from everything in creation but also from everything sinful. The Lord's holiness entails His purpose to glorify Himself in all that He does. If He is supremely holy, then He must honor Himself as such and require others to do the same. If He did not, He would deny Himself.

If we honor and serve ourselves, then we honor what is finite, sinful, and mortal. Self-glorification is not a fault in God. Edward Leigh wrote, "God's holiness is that excellency of his

nature, by which he gives himself (as I may say) unto himself, doing all for himself, and in all, and by all, and above all, aiming at his own pleasure and glory." The Lord commands us to love Him with all our hearts, all our souls, and all our strength (Deut 6:5). But God alone is able to love Himself with an infinite love, for He alone is infinitely holy.

God's moral holiness is not a separate attribute from God's holiness of majesty. It is better to think of it as another dimension of the one divine holiness. Historically, the church has typically emphasized this aspect of holiness. Holiness is defined more narrowly as God's moral purity. He "is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5); that is, His is a light free of anything that would color, dim, or distort it. As such, God possesses a settled opposition to all impurity. Habakkuk refers to God as the "Holy One" who is "of purer eyes than to behold evil" and cannot "look on iniquity" with approval and pleasure (Hab 1:12-13).

The moral holiness of God is the absolute righteousness of His whole nature. It sanctifies all that God does and puts divine glory into all His works. Without holiness, God would not be God. Again, Edward Leigh said, "Holiness is the beauty of all God's attributes, without which his wisdom would be but subtlety, his justice cruelty, his sovereignty tyranny, his mercy foolish pity." With holiness, however, all of God's attributes shine with attractive loveliness and blazing purity.

## **God's Holiness and Our Sin**

Returning to Isaiah, you will recall that the vision of divine holiness broke him. It threatened to destroy him. He cried

out, “Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips” (Isa. 6:5). He recognized that God’s holiness was incompatible with his own uncleanness.

Since we are sinners through the tragic fall of Adam and through our own daily transgressions, we cannot appease God by our efforts. Created in God’s image, we voluntarily chose to be unholy in His sight. It is not the nature of man that God hates, but rather the corruption of man’s nature. Sin always dishonors the Holy One, for it is a failure to love Him supremely. It is a rejection of God as God. Thus, He cannot overlook our sin without denying Himself.

We should grieve over our moral uncleanness as repulsive in His holy sight. Too often we view our sins as mere mistakes or ways that we hurt other people. Let us measure our sins by this: we have disobeyed and despised the Word of the Holy One! Every time we disobey His commands, we treat what is sacred as if it were profane. The holy God sees our sins and hates them. What horror would fill the souls of unforgiven sinners if He were to appear in His holy glory today! They would be driven away as smoke, and melt like wax in the fire; they would perish in His presence (Ps 68:2). Let us seek grace to turn away from all sin and hate it as He does.

God’s holiness guarantees that He will glorify Himself in executing justice upon sinners. Isaiah 5:15–16 says, “And the mean [common] man shall be brought down, and the mighty man shall be humbled, and the eyes of the lofty shall be humbled: but the Lord of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness.” In His holiness, the Lord will certainly judge and avenge every sin committed against Him. On the last day, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. And if left to ourselves, we will be found severely wanting.

How then can sinful people like us be delivered from such holy judgment? By way of holy sacrifice. God revealed under the old covenant that blood must be shed if we are to be granted remission of sins. Ultimately, only Christ Jesus can fulfill the demands of God’s holiness on behalf of sinners. As 1 Timothy 2:5–6 states, “There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.” More than anywhere else, the cross displays to us the holiness of God. It shows us how intense His hatred for sin is. He subjected His eternally beloved Son to wrath and death because of it. Stephen Charnock writes, “Not all the vials of judgments, that have, or shall be poured out upon the wicked world, nor the flaming furnace of a sinner’s conscience, nor the irreversible sentence pronounced against the rebellious devils, nor the groans of the damned creatures, give such a demonstration of God’s hatred of sin, as the wrath of God let loose upon

his Son.” God’s grace in Christ does not violate His holiness. Rather, through Christ, a way is made for sinners to be reconciled to God, a way that accords with His holiness.

We must trust in God’s holy Son for the cleansing that only His blood affords. Christ is the Holy One of God, the fullness of God’s holiness dwelling in human flesh (Mark 1:24; Col 2:9). Yet He came not to condemn the world but to save the world—to save all people who believe in Him alone for salvation (John 3:16–18). By His death as the atoning sacrifice and substitute for His people, Christ has once for all made them perfect and holy in God’s sight (Heb 10:10, 14). The merits of His death and resurrection can only be received by faith. When we by grace humble ourselves and trust in Christ, then God pardons our sins and gives us life, promising to dwell with us forever.

Are you trusting wholly and solely in Christ? My friend, God cannot overlook your sins. He is holy. Judgment is certain. Hebrews 9:27 states, “It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.” All of us will die. And all of us will stand before the judgment seat of God. What a horrifying thing to stand before this holy God in our sinful filth. We have defiled God’s law. We have rebelled against the Holy One. And left to ourselves, there is nothing but wrath and hell awaiting us. But here is the good news of the gospel, good news for sinners like us. Jesus has taken the sins of His people upon Himself. He has borne the wrath that that sin deserves on the cross. He underwent the agony of hell for sinners like us. And He rose victorious over sin and death.

### ***God’s Holiness and Our Holiness***

God’s holiness not only exposes our sin but also serves as the pattern for our obedience. His moral holiness blazes forth in His law. Paul says of the law that it is “holy, and just, and good” (Rom 7:12). The law not only serves to convict us of sin and show us where we have failed. It also serves as a perfect pattern for holiness, for it describes the life that Christ lived among us! By His law, God calls us to holiness, saying, “Be ye holy; for I am holy” (Lev 11:45). Human holiness is obedience to God’s law. In this sense, God’s holiness is a communicable attribute, something the Creator can share to some degree with His creatures.

Christ is the perfect image of God’s holiness. As the obedient Son, He ever conformed to God’s law. As the spotless Lamb of God, He never transgressed God’s law. There was no taint of sin or corruption in His human soul. He “was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15). He was perfectly set apart and devoted to His Father’s purposes. And thus, in His incarnation we behold the beauty of holiness in human flesh. In Christ we are given a picture of what God wills us to become by His grace. Believers, through their

union with the holy Christ and through beholding God's glory in Him, become like Him in holiness.

The Bible calls this conformity to Christ's holiness *sanctification*. The noun comes from the verb *sanctify*, which means "to make holy" or "to set apart." It is important to distinguish between sanctification as a *status* and as a *condition*. Christians are saints (i.e., "holy ones"); they have been set apart unto Jesus Christ at conversion. This refers to the believer's *status* as sanctified. As Hebrews 10:10 makes clear, "We are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." The believer's *status* before God is one of perfect righteousness and sanctity in Christ on account of His perfect obedience and death.

However, this status does not mean that the believer is in a wholly sanctified *condition*. His pursuit of holiness is progressive, and his war against the world, the flesh, and the devil is life-long. Our *status* in holiness is conferred, whereas our *condition* in holiness must be pursued. These two aspects of sanctification are often distinguished terminologically as *definitive* or *initial* sanctification (by which we are given a holy *status*) and *progressive* sanctification (by which our *condition* is made increasingly holy).

God sets us apart unto Himself in Christ and then He works out His sanctifying purpose in us throughout the rest of our lives. A helpful definition of sanctification is set forth in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 35: "Sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness." Notice three important truths from this definition.

First, sanctification is a work of God's free, undeserved grace. This grace comes to us in Christ and by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit has promised to apply to us all that we have in

Christ. The Spirit, working with the Word, is the primary agent of our growth in holiness. The Spirit acts sovereignly in initial sanctification, in our regeneration and conversion. We have no part in this work. But He also continues to work in progressive sanctification. This does not make us passive subjects or recipients. We work out what the Spirit is graciously working in us. As Philippians 2:12–13 states, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." We have work to do in our sanctification. But our pursuit of holiness can only succeed because God is working in us toward that end. Without His gracious indwelling and enablement, sanctification would be utterly impossible for us.

Second, sanctification is essentially our renewal after God's image. In our fall, we radically defaced and defiled the divine image in which we were created, casting away knowledge for ignorance, righteousness for corruption, and holiness for perversity. In our sanctification God reverses the effects of the fall, renewing us that we might reflect Him in the world. God changes the heart, and out of that change comes new character. This change is comprehensive, entailing "the whole man." Holiness must be inward, filling our entire heart. It also must be outward, extending to all of life so that, as 1 Thessalonians 5:23 says, our "whole spirit and soul and body may be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." Sanctification is a whole-life commitment to live God-ward and to set all things apart to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Third, sanctification works itself out through increasingly dying to sin and living to righteousness. This is often called *mortification* and *quickenning* or *vivification*. *Mortification* refers to the act of putting to death every form of sin and resisting every temptation. The Christian life is one of intense warfare against sin and Satan. Either we strike a deadly blow





# IF THE CHURCH WOULD BE WHAT GOD HAS CALLED HER TO BE, IF YOU AND I WOULD LIVE HOLY LIVES IN CHRIST, WE MUST BE CULTIVATING THIS REVERENTIAL FEAR OF GOD.

to sin, or sin will destroy us. As John Owen said, “Be killing sin, or it will be killing you.” The counterpart to mortification is called *vivification*. This refers to the quickening, or bringing to life, of the new nature we have received in Christ. We must not only seek to put carnality and worldliness to death; we must also seek to do the will of God from the heart. For we have not only died to sin; we have also been raised up to newness of life in Jesus Christ. Killing earthly lusts is not enough. We need both killing and quickening, ceasing to do evil and learning to do well. And God in sanctification “enables us” to do these things “more and more” as we are progressively conformed to His image.

If you are a Christian, God is working in you to make you more like Himself, and more like His Son. Is it not amazing to think that the thrice holy Creator King is at work in you and me? He is desirous that we would reflect His moral beauty in this world. Thus, we should strive with all our might to live holy lives. This requires us to learn what pleases God from His holy law, to depend upon God’s Holy Spirit to sanctify us by Christ’s grace, to fight against all sin in our lives and pursue personal holiness, and to walk in fellowship with God’s holy church so that we can encourage and help each other. If God is your Father through Jesus Christ, then His calling to you is, “Be ye holy; for I am holy” (1 Pet 1:16).

## **Conclusion: Fear the Holy One**

God’s majestic holiness and moral holiness are two sides of God’s holy name. They cannot be separated. God’s majesty requires that God be honored. And such God-ward honor is the foundation of all moral obligation and true love. Also, God’s majesty would be terrifying if it did not include moral perfection. Without it, God would be a tyrannical dictator.

The right human response to God’s majestic and moral holiness is the fear of God. This fear is faith contemplating God’s

power and holiness, just as love is faith contemplating His love and mercy. Moses said that God is “glorious in holiness, fearful in praises” (Exod 15:11). Proverbs 9:10 says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy [Holy One, esv] is understanding.” David prayed, “In thy fear will I worship toward thy holy temple” (Ps 5:7).

What does it mean to fear God? John Murray describes it as “the controlling sense of the majesty and holiness of God.” Fearing God does not mean we are scared of God. It means that we reverence and honor Him. It means that our lives are lived before His face, conscious of His holiness, and zealous for the exaltation of His name. When we fear God, we recognize that we are dealing with Someone infinitely greater than anyone else we know. God takes His rightful place as dominant and supreme in our lives. Such a fear teaches us to value the smiles and frowns of God more than the smiles and frowns of people. What pleases Him or displeases Him begins to outweigh all other considerations.

While carnal and slavish fear drives us away from that which we fear, the filial or childlike fear of God attracts us to him. Isaiah 8:13–14 says, “Sanctify the Lord of hosts himself; and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. And he shall be for a sanctuary.” When by grace you honor God’s holiness, you find that His holiness becomes your hiding place.

If the church would be what God has called her to be, if you and I would live holy lives in Christ, we must be cultivating this reverential fear of God. Is your worship sluggish? Is your obedience half-hearted? Do you find yourself easily distracted by worldly desires and anxieties? Have you shrunk back from opportunities to speak up as a witness for the Lord? Seek a renewed sight of God’s holiness in the Word. Seek to cultivate the fear of God. Pray, “Unite my heart to fear thy name” (Ps 86:11). There is perhaps no prayer that God more delights to answer than that. ♦





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# The Highest Beauty

MICHAEL REEVES

God's holiness.

"Oh dear!" you might sigh—and I'd understand, for without the Trinity, holiness does have the smell of mothballs about it, the look of a Victorian matron administering castor oil. And much of what purports to be holiness has just that aura about it: all prickliness and prudery. People even say things like, "Yes, God is loving, but He is *also* holy"—as if holiness is an unloving thing, the cold side of God that stops God from being too loving.

Balderdash! Poppycock! Or at least, it is if you are talking about the holiness of the Father, Son, and Spirit. No, said Jonathan Edwards:

Holiness is a most beautiful, lovely thing. Men are apt to drink in strange notions of holiness from their childhood, as if it were a melancholy, morose, sour, and unpleasant thing; but there is nothing in it but what is sweet and ravishingly lovely. 'Tis the highest beauty and amiableness, vastly above all other beauties; 'tis a divine beauty.

What is holiness, then? The words used for holiness in the Bible have the basic meaning of being "set apart." But there our troubles begin, because naturally I think I'm lovely. So if God is "set apart" from me, I assume the problem is with

Him (and I can do all this in the subtlest, most subconscious way). His holiness looks like a prissy rejection of my happy, healthy loveliness.

Dare I burst my own bubble now? I must.

For the reality is that *I* am the cold, selfish, vicious one, full of darkness and dirtiness. And God is holy—"set apart" from me—precisely in that He is not like that. He is not set apart from us in priggishness, but by the fact that there are no such ugly traits in Him as there are in us.

"God is God," wrote Edwards, "and distinguished from [that is, set apart from] all other beings, and exalted above 'em, *chiefly by his divine beauty*" (for the connection between holiness and beauty, see verses like Psalm 96:9).

Now the holiness of a single-person God would be something quite different. His holiness would be about being set apart *away from others*. In other words, His holiness would be all about aloof distance. But the holiness of the Father, Son, and Spirit is all about love. Given who this God is, it must be.

Edwards again: "Both the holiness and happiness of the Godhead consists in this love. As we have already proved, all creature holiness consists essentially and summarily in love to God and love to other creatures; *so does the holiness of God consist in His love, especially in the perfect and intimate union and love there is between the Father and the Son.*"

The holiness of the triune God is the perfection, beauty,

# NO WONDER THE TWO GREATEST COMMANDS ARE “LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD” AND “LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.” FOR THAT IS BEING LIKE THIS GOD—SHARING THE LOVE THE FATHER AND THE SON HAVE FOR EACH OTHER, AND THEN, LIKE THEM, OVERFLOWING WITH THAT LOVE TO THE WORLD.

and absolute purity of the love there is between the Father and the Son. There is nothing grubby or abusive about the love of this God—and *thus* He is holy. My love is naturally all perverse and misdirected; but His love is set apart from mine in perfection. And so, the holiness of the triune God does not moderate or cool His love; His holiness is the lucidity and spotlessness of His overflowing love.

It all dramatically affects what it means for the believer to be holy, to be godly—in other words, what it means to be like God. Being like another God would look quite different. If God is a being curved in on Himself, then to be like Him I should be like that. If Aristotle’s eternally introspective God is God, then plenty of navel-gazing seems to be just what’s called for.

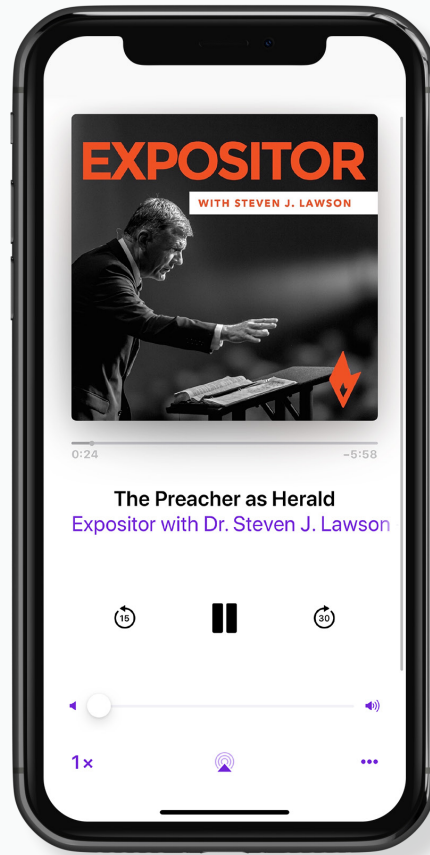
For what we think God is like must shape our godliness, and what we think godliness is reveals what we think of God. So, what, for example, if love and relationship were not central to God’s being? Then they wouldn’t feature for me either as I sought to grow in God-likeness. Forget others. If God is all single and solitary, be a hermit. If God is cruel and haughty, be cruel and haughty. If God is the sort of oversexed, beer-sloshing war-god beloved of the Vikings, be like that. (Though please don’t.)

But with this God, no wonder the two greatest commands are “love the Lord your God” and “love your neighbor as yourself.” For that is being like this God—sharing the love the Father and the Son have for each other, and then, like them,

overflowing with that love to the world. Or look, for example, at Leviticus 19, where the Lord famously says, “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Lev 19:2). What does holiness look like there? It means not turning to idols but coming to the Lord with proper fellowship offerings (Lev 19:4–8). That is, it means fellowship with the Lord. And it means not being mean to the poor, not lying, not stealing, and so on (Lev 19:10–16)—that is, it means: “Do not hate your brother in your heart . . . but love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:17–18). Love for the Lord, love for neighbor—that is the heart of holiness and how the triune God’s people get to be like Him.

The beautiful, loving holiness of this God makes true godliness a warm, attractive, delightful thing. It is not about becoming more mean and pinched, for this God is not mean and pinched. Holiness for God, said Edwards, “is as it were the beauty and sweetness of the divine nature,” and so “Christians that shine by reflecting the light of the Sun of Righteousness, do shine with the same sort of brightness, the same mild, sweet and pleasant beams.”

And most essentially, to know and enjoy the God who is love means becoming, like Him, loving. “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:7–8). ♦



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# NEW LIFE IN CHRIST

*by* STEVEN J. LAWSON

What actually happens when you trust Christ for salvation?

The single most important event in a person's life is the new birth. Yet many Christians would be hard-pressed to describe exactly what it is, let alone what it means to the rest of their walk with God. What happens when we are born again? Does everything in our lives change immediately? Is it just a kind of spiritual do-over, a chance to get it right this time? What happens when we fail? Does it mean we weren't really born again to begin with?

With a pastor's heart and a professor's insight, Steven Lawson carefully examines the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus found in John 3 to uncover the nature of this spiritual rebirth. He shows you the necessity of the new birth, how God changes our hearts through it, and what follows after, from baptism and involvement in a local church to handling doubts and setbacks.

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DEREK W. H. THOMAS, senior minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia,  
South Carolina; chancellor's professor, Reformed Theological Seminary;  
teaching fellow, Ligonier Ministries



FOREWORD BY  
SINCLAIR FERGUSON

**NEW LIFE**

*in*

**CHRIST**

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WHAT REALLY HAPPENS  
WHEN YOU'RE BORN AGAIN AND  
WHY IT MATTERS

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**STEVEN J. LAWSON**



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# The Spirit of Holiness

MICHAEL A.G. HAYKIN

In a study of the concept of holiness in the ancient world, Hannah K. Harrington maintains that for pre-Christian and first-century Judaism,

holiness describes God more closely than any other designation. His very essence is holiness. One could say that holiness is God's "innermost reality," to which all of His attributes are related.

To describe God as holy was, for these Jews, to speak of His transcendent perfection and His, as Hannah Harrington puts it in her book on holiness in the Graeco-Roman world, "exalted, powerful otherness that brings people to both admire and fear him." Inextricably linked to this description, in their minds, was also the conviction that God is omnibenevolent. In all of His doings, God is utterly beneficent and wholly righteous in His exercise of justice and mercy.

When the New Testament, therefore, describes the Spirit of God as the "Holy Spirit," "the Spirit, the Holy One," or as Romans 1:4 says, "the Spirit of holiness," a profound statement is being made about the nature of the Spirit. Since innate holiness belongs only to God, to call the Spirit "holy" is to imply that He is holy by nature and must be divine. There is, however, no extended discussion in the New Testament of the Spirit's nature. But in the three centuries immediately

following the apostolic era, this subject was raised and an answer that was ultimately shaped by Scripture given: the Spirit is fully God and worthy of divine honors.

It fell especially to the fourth-century Cappadocian Fathers—Basil of Caesarea (c. 329-379), his brother Gregory of Nyssa (c.335-c. 395), their close friend Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329-389/90), and Nazianzen's cousin Amphilochius of Iconium (c. 340-c. 395)—to elucidate for the church the biblical data regarding the person of the Holy Spirit. Basil's superb defense of the propriety of worshiping the Spirit in his important treatise *On the Holy Spirit* (375), for example, led directly to the third article of the creedal statement issued at the Council of Constantinople (381) in which, among other things, it was confessed: "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, . . . who together with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified." There is every reason to believe that Basil's younger brother, Gregory—Basil had died two years earlier in 379—was asked to draw up this article.

Now, the connection between the Spirit's innate holiness and His deity is clearly brought out in a letter that Basil wrote in 373:

We glorify the Holy Spirit together with the Father and the Son, from the conviction that he is not separated from the divine nature: what is foreign by nature does

not share in the same honors. . . . [For] the creature is sanctified; the Spirit sanctifies. Whether you name angels, archangels, or all the heavenly powers, they receive their sanctification through the Spirit, but the Spirit has his holiness by nature, not as received by grace, but essentially his. From this, he has received the distinctive name of Holy. What then is by nature holy, as the Father is by nature holy and the Son by nature holy, we do not allow to be separated and severed from the divine and blessed Trinity . . .

At the heart of this argument for the divine transcendence of the Spirit is the fact that He sanctifies others, for only that which is holy by nature—and thus divine—can sanctify another.

On the other hand, if one inquires as to what the New Testament teaches about the Spirit's sanctifying work, there is an abundance of material that could be examined. In what follows, key texts from two letters in the Pauline corpus—Romans and 1 Thessalonians—serve as the basis of a discussion of the Holy Spirit as the giver of holiness.

### The Spirit of Holiness

One does not have to read far in Romans—the most systematic of all of Paul's letters—to encounter a reference to the Spirit's sanctifying work. In Romans 1:4 Paul describes the Spirit with a phrase that is unique in the New Testament—he is the “Spirit of holiness.” What exactly does the Apostle mean by describing the Spirit thus? Why does he not use the more common term “Holy Spirit”? For some writers the terms “Holy Spirit” and “Spirit of holiness” are simply synonymous, and they understand the term “Spirit of holiness” to mean something like “the Spirit whose character is holiness.” There is another way, though, to understand this phrase, and that is to see it as a description of the Spirit's work: He is the giver of holiness, the One who supplies holiness to all who call upon the name of Jesus. Given the Old Testament form of the phrase “Spirit of holiness,” the latter interpretation is probably the better of the two. It highlights the fact that central among the activities of the Spirit is the sanctification of the people of God. In fact, for Paul as for the other New Testament authors, the Holy Spirit is indispensable for living a life that pleases God.

Another key text with regard to the Spirit's sanctifying work is found in Romans 15:8-21. Here, the Apostle begins by indicating that one of the ultimate goals of Christ's ministry was that Gentiles might come to glorify the God of Israel for being a God of mercy. The citation of four Old Testament texts, drawn from various parts of the Old Testament canon, supports this affirmation. Christ's intentions with regard to

the Gentiles is of central concern to the Apostle, for he has been called by God to preach Christ among the Gentiles where the name of Jesus has never been heard, or, as he puts it earlier, “to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God.”

Using imagery drawn from the temple worship of Israel to describe his ministry, Paul argues that Gentiles—who were formerly ritually impure and thus utterly unacceptable to God—have now become acceptable to God. In the immediate context of these verses, what has made them acceptable is their embrace of the gospel, which, in turn, was made possible by the Holy Spirit's power. In Paul's words, they have been “sanctified by the Holy Spirit,” that is, set apart to serve God and to fulfill His purposes, which, because of God's holy character, inevitably involves leading lives of godliness. It is on the basis of this sanctifying work of the Spirit that Paul, later in this chapter and in the one that follows, can call believers “saints.”

Earlier in this letter, the sanctifying work of the Spirit had also been highlighted in Romans 8:1-4. Christ came into the world so that those who believe in Him would be able to truly obey the essence of the law. Central to Christ's death is the liberation of men and women from the death-dealing bondage of sin. This obedience and freedom are made a reality in believers by the Spirit, who is none other than the “Spirit of life,” that is, the Spirit of the living God, the source of all that is good. Thus, the liberating work of the Spirit is rooted in the saving work of Christ.

Again, in this chapter, Paul emphasizes that the Spirit's indwelling presence in the life of the believer provides him or her with rich resources to fight sin: Romans 8:12-14. Although the believer has been radically delivered from sin's tyranny, this does not mean—as so much of the teaching of the New Testament makes clear—that he or she now experientially enjoys perfect holiness. There is an ongoing battle with sin and thus the necessity of heeding the Apostle's admonition to mortify sin.

This work of mortification—the “gradual annihilation of all the remainders of this cursed life of sin,” as the Puritan author John Owen (1616-1683) aptly puts it—involves the believer's complete involvement, though ultimately it is the Spirit's work. Owen well sums up the Apostle's thought in this regard when he states in his classic exposition of Romans 8:13, *The Mortification of Sin in Believers* (1656), that the Spirit

doth not so work our mortification in us as not to keep it still an act of our obedience. The Holy Ghost works in us and upon us, as we are fit to be wrought in and upon; that is, so as to preserve our own liberty and free obedience. He works upon our understandings, wills, consciences,

# BECAUSE YOU ARE SAINTS, LEAD HOLY LIVES; LIVE IN HOLY CONFORMITY WITH THE SPIRIT WHO INDWELLS YOU. SINCE HE IS HOLY, BE HOLY.

and affections, agreeably to their own natures; he works in us and with us, not against us or without us; so that his assistance is an encouragement as to the facilitating of the work, and no occasion of neglect as to the work itself.

In other words, this is a variation on one of the central ethical principles of the New Testament: be what you are. Because you are saints, lead holy lives; live in holy conformity with the Spirit who indwells you. Since he is holy, be holy. Paul puts it this way at the close of another well-known passage that deals with the sanctifying work of the Spirit: “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit” (Gal 5:25).


## Sanctification, Sexuality and the Spirit

Turning to Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, we find that the recipients of this letter had once been men and women in bondage to idolatry. That bondage, though, had been broken when, through Paul’s preaching of the gospel, they had been freed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Subsequently, Paul had been forced to leave Thessalonica due to opposition to the gospel. Not surprisingly, he was quite concerned to know how the Thessalonian believers were faring. Cognizant of the pressure that pagan Graeco-Roman culture with its decadent sexual mores could exert upon those living within its midst, he reminded the Thessalonians that central to God’s will for their lives was their “sanctification.” Something of the importance that the Apostle places on this reminder is seen in the fact that he then proceeds to spell out what their sanctification entails. Ever conscious of the authority which God has given to him as an apostle, Paul never hesitates to be specific in telling people what they should do and why.

For the average Greek or Roman of Paul’s day, there was

nothing wrong with extramarital sex as long as it was within the bounds of moderation. In this regard their culture was not too different from our contemporary world. But such a lifestyle was, and is, utterly opposed to the wishes of the Spirit. In Galatians 5:19, illicit forms of sex—spelled out as “sexual immorality (*porneia*), impurity (*akarthasia*), licentiousness (*aselgeia*)”—are placed among those things to which “the Spirit stands in . . . unrelieved opposition.” For Paul, full sexual expression is divinely designed by God to take place within the context of covenant marriage, where it is rooted in and surrounded by a framework of secure, intimate love (see Eph 5:25–33; 1 Cor 7:1–5).

Sanctification also involves self-control (1 Thess 4:4), though scholars are divided as to exactly what is the object of this self-control. The King James Version’s rendition of the verse comes as close to a literal rendering as one could desire: “Every one of you should know how to possess his vessel (*skeuos*) in sanctification and honor” (κτν). What exactly does Paul mean by the term “vessel”? *The Revised Standard Version*, following an interpretation that goes back to Augustine (354–430) in the early fifth century, understands this phrase to be a euphemism for “wife.” Thus, those who translated with this understanding render this clause: “that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor.” The weight of evidence, however, is in favor of those who would translate the term *skeuos* as one’s own body, a perspective that includes the early Christian author Tertullian (fl.190–215) and the French Reformer John Calvin (1509–1564). Thus, for example, *The English Standard Version* has “each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor.” Sanctification leads to self-control in sexual matters and a refusal to use one’s own body—or that of



# THE GREAT CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGE OF EMBRACING THE BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ABOUT THE HOLINESS OF THE TRIUNE GOD, IN GENERAL, AND THE SPIRIT'S SANCTIFYING WORK, IN PARTICULAR, IS THAT THE IDEAS OF HUMAN DEPRAVITY *CORAM DEO* AND THEREFORE OF THE DESPERATE NEED FOR THE SPIRIT'S SANCTIFYING GRACE DO NOT CHIME WELL WITH MODERN SENSIBILITIES.

another, which, if it is not in view in verse 4, is clearly in view in verse 6—as a “thing” simply to slake one’s sexual thirst.

Paul now grounds these admonitions in three affirmations. First, there is the reality of God’s judgment. One day God will judge all who have engaged in sexual immorality and die unrepentant (1 Thess 4:6). Then, God’s calling for all Christians is that they turn away from sexual “impurity” and lead lives marked by holiness (v. 7). Paul’s third and final reason is that the professing believer who rejects—or “spurns” or “despises”—Paul’s admonitions is not rejecting the words of a man. Not at all! Such a person is rejecting God Himself. Now, Paul could very easily have stopped here. For a professing Christian to knowingly disobey God is serious enough. Why then does he go on to describe the God who is disobeyed as the giver of the Holy Spirit?

Two reasons are apparent. First of all, Paul lays particular stress on the Spirit as the *Holy Spirit*. The Greek literally runs thus: “God, who gives his Spirit, the Holy One, to you.” Fee points out that Paul makes a point of highlighting this major

characteristic of the Spirit: His holiness. It’s as if Paul were giving an answer to the question: “How do we know God desires our holiness?” Well, Paul replies, He’s given us His *Holy Spirit*, the one who has, as I. Howard Marshall puts it, the “power to make believers holy.” The Holy Spirit never comes into a human life apart from His holiness. As George Verwer has rightly noted: The Holy Spirit “cannot come without His moral character.”

Then, second, this gift of the Spirit is a fulfillment of the promise made by God in Ezekiel 36:27 and 37:14. Paul is clearly alluding to both of these verses when he says “God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.” At the heart of these verses from Ezekiel is the promise of a future gift of the Holy Spirit that will lead to genuine moral transformation. Paul is claiming that what God had promised to give in the days of Ezekiel has now been given, and the reality of that inner transformation about which these Old Testament texts speak has been realized. Of course, this does not mean, as we have already noted, that the indwelling presence of the Spirit spells perfec-

tion. But as Gordon Fee notes, this “does mean that one is left without argument for helplessness” and that “the pagan plea that man has no power to resist impure desires” is decisively answered. To reject the command to be holy, then, is to say that one is not indwelt by the Spirit and not at all a believer.

### The Contemporary Scene and the Spirit’s Ongoing Power

The great contemporary challenge of embracing the biblical perspective about the holiness of the Triune God, in general, and the Spirit’s sanctifying work, in particular, is that the ideas of human depravity *coram Deo* and therefore of the desperate need for the Spirit’s sanctifying grace do not chime well with modern sensibilities. Men and women today do not view themselves as sinners who fall short of the holiness demanded by a thrice-holy God. Dominique Clift, writing in the late 1980s from the vantage point of twenty-five years of commenting on Canadian society and politics, well describes this modern situation when he writes:

The most significant break with earlier religious attitudes, the one with the most far-reaching psychological consequences because of its effect on the way people see themselves, is the elimination of feelings of guilt and of unworthiness as the foundations of religious life. This development coincides with the appearance of more permissive social standards, particularly in sexual matters.... Somehow religion has moved beyond ethics: what has become uppermost today is the religious experience itself.

J. I. Packer, in his own inimitable way, describes the same phenomenon as a day of “unwarrantably great thoughts of humanity and scandalously small thoughts of God.” Our day, he predicts, will be remembered as “the age of the God-shrinkers.” The result, he says, is that

belief in God’s sovereignty and omniscience, the majesty of his moral law and the terror of his judgements, the retributive consequences of the life we live here and the endlessness of eternity in which we will experience them, along with the intrinsic triunity of God and the divinity and personal return of Jesus Christ, is nowadays so eroded as to be hardly discernible. For many in our day, God is no more than a smudge.

Part of the solution is to immerse ourselves afresh in the biblical perspectives about God and His holiness, and radically re-orient our mindset to what constitutes reality. Another part is to recognize that the Holy Spirit is still sovereign and has ways of overriding the barriers erected by erroneous thinking.

Consider the case of Mary Stewart, who came to know Christ in that turbulent era of the late sixties and early seventies and found that she had some radical choices to make in her life. In her own words:

I had no intention of giving any of that [my old life] up. When I accepted Christ, I figured that it was the spirit of the law, not the letter, that mattered, that “love” was the overriding principle, and that I could witness in bed as easily as anywhere else.

But to my progressive astonishment, I found all that changing. Not quickly. Not all at once. Not by anyone’s prying into my personal life or trying to send me on a guilt-trip (although I am sure I had lots of people praying for me). It was totally a process of God’s working on me, one item of behavior at a time, over many months, like patiently peeling one layer after another off an onion.

As God’s Spirit began to enable her to “walk in His statutes,” as promised in Ezekiel 36:27 (a verse Stewart cites herself), she came to find herself “progressively liberated, gentled and strengthened,” and, in her own words, “I wanted God’s Spirit more than I wanted transient physical titillation.”

Modern sensibilities be what they may, God’s Spirit and His sweet grace are ultimately, thankfully, and blessedly irresistible. And this gives us great hope and encouragement. Well did John Ryland, Jr. (1753–1825), the close friend of Andrew Fuller (1754–1815) and William Carey (1761–1834), express this truth, albeit with reference to a much broader context, in a 1792 circular letter that he drew up for the Particular Baptist churches of the Northamptonshire Association:

Surely the state both of the world, and of church, calls loudly upon us all to persist in wrestling instantly with God, for greater effusions of his Holy Spirit . . . Let us not cease crying mightily unto the Lord, “until the Spirit be poured upon us from on high” [Isaiah 32:15]; then the wilderness shall become as a fruitful field, and the desert like the garden of God. Yes, beloved, the Scriptures cannot be broken. Jesus must reign universally. All nations shall own him. All people shall serve him. His kingdom shall be extended, not by human might, or power, but by the effusion of His Holy Spirit [cf. Zechariah 4:6].

The Spirit’s work will ultimately be victorious—both in the personal lives of those whom He indwells and throughout this globe. ♦







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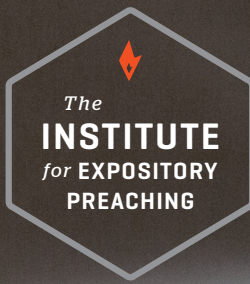
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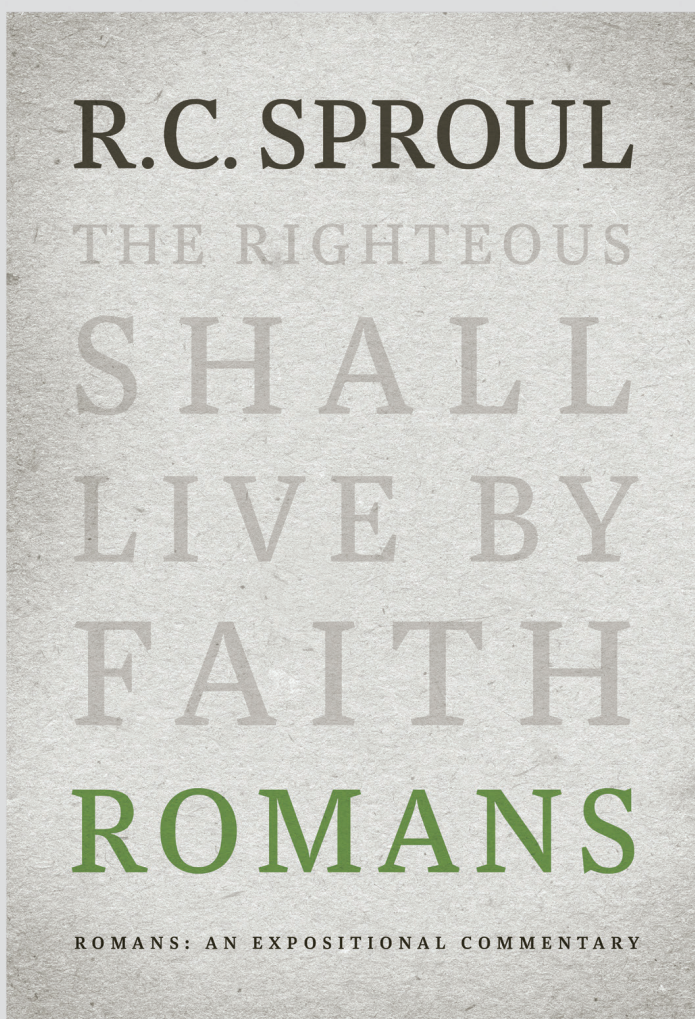
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